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Slavery at the Time of the Roman Empire

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Slavery in ancient Rome differed from its modern forms in that it was not based on race.

But like modern slavery, it was an abusive and degrading act and way of life.

A common practice

Slavery had a long history in the ancient world and was practiced in Ancient Egypt and Greece, as well as Rome. Most slaves during the Roman Empire were foreigners and, unlike in modern times, Roman slavery was not based on race.

Slaves in Rome might include prisoners of war, sailors captured and sold by pirates, or slaves bought outside Roman territory. In hard times, it was not uncommon for desperate Roman citizens to raise money by selling their children into slavery.



Life as a slave

All slaves and their families were the property of their owners, who could sell or rent them out at any time. Their lives were harsh. Slaves were often whipped, branded or cruelly mistreated. Their owners could also kill them for any reason, and would face no punishment.



Essential labor

Slaves worked everywhere – in private households, in mines and factories, and on farms. They also worked for city governments on engineering projects such as roads, aqueducts and buildings. As a result, they merged easily into the population.

